

WILLIAM H. FOEGE, MD, MPH

*Recipient of the 2007 Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Award
for Humanitarian Contributions to the Health of Humankind*

William H. Foegen, MD, MPH has been called a giant in his field, the embodiment of dedication and achievement in the improvement of public health world wide. In recognition of his work he is this year's recipient of the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Award for Humanitarian Contributions to the Health of Humankind.

Dr. Foegen received his medical degree from the University of Washington in 1961. After graduation Dr. Foegen interned at the US Public Health Service Hospital on Staten Island in New York and then became an officer in the Epidemic Intelligence Service at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In 1965 he received a Master's degree in public health from Harvard.

As a teenager, Dr. Foegen had been inspired by reading about Dr. Albert Schweitzer's medical missionary work in Africa and his principle of reverence for life. He resolved that he, as did Dr. Schweitzer, would minister to the health needs of the world's poor. "One measure of civilization is how well we treat the most vulnerable members of our society," he says.

Dr. Foegen's opportunity to fulfill his goal occurred the year after he obtained his public health degree. In 1966 he went to Yahe in the eastern part of Nigeria to run a Lutheran church mission medical center. He was asked by the CDC if he would consult on a twenty county CDC smallpox eradication program. While at Harvard he had

written a paper on the subject, "so I was interested," Dr. Foegen says.

At the time, public health authorities believed that in order to effectively control disease at least 80% of a population, perhaps even more, had to be vaccinated. But, in eastern Nigeria, Dr. Foegen worked on an outbreak before sufficient supplies were available. Faced with a smallpox outbreak and with an insufficient vaccine supply, Dr. Foegen and the mission staff decided that the only course they could take was to immunize around known cases, as well as locate and immunize those who might have



been exposed to the virus through family contact or other associations.

Using the mission's ham radio system they called on other medical missionaries in the area to identify smallpox cases in their districts. "In 24 hours we had reports of every village with smallpox cases," Dr. Foegen says. With this information and using what vaccine they had, they immunized those at risk living in these villages. It was a novel strategy that worked. "Using a relatively small amount of vaccine, we stopped the outbreak," says Dr. Foegen. The approach was then used in the entire Eastern Region of Nigeria and cases ceased in five months. The strategy was replicated throughout the 20 county area and smallpox disappeared.

In 1970 Dr. Foegen returned to the US and joined the CDC where he headed the agency's smallpox eradication program. Initially his strategy of surveillance and containment was received with widespread skepticism. "A cracked-brain scheme completely out of touch with reality," said one critic. But Dr. Foegen "has a great talent for coming up with creative ideas and presenting them in a way that doesn't threaten people," says William Watson a former deputy director at the CDC. Dr. Foegen says that to be a successful leader in public health one has to know how to build successful coalitions.

Dr. Foegen's efforts at coalition building paid off. Despite his own skepticism Dr. Donald Hopkins, at the time a CDC physician in Sierra Leone, decided to give the "cracked-brain" scheme a try. Within nine months, with less than 70% of the population vaccinated, smallpox had vanished.

Over the next few years in almost every area where smallpox occurred and the strategy of surveillance and containment was applied to immunization efforts the disease was eradicated. The World Health Organization, also initially skeptical, eventually adopted the strategy when it mounted its smallpox eradication campaign. In



1977 the last case of smallpox in the world occurred in Somalia.

That same year Dr. Foegen became director of the CDC. He took over at a time of major changes in the agency. CDC programs were being expanded to include not just infectious disease surveillance and control but also population studies, environmental and occupational health, violence, and injuries. This expansion came at a price, Dr. Foegen notes. When dealing with infectious diseases effective measures can be mounted if they are based on the best available science. But in this larger public health arena this is not always possible. There are many examples.

One example Dr. Foegen cites occurred in 1980. There were an increasing number of reports of a rare but serious illness affecting the blood, liver, and brain of children and adolescents up to 16 years of age. The disorder, first identified in 1963 by Australian pathologist Dr. Douglas Reye, is now known as Reye's syndrome. In four or five studies, CDC investigators linked the condition to the use of aspirin among children recovering from viral infections such as influenza or chickenpox. Although the studies were too small to show statistical validity, "there was no question that the findings were valid," says Dr. Foegen. He called for a warning notice on aspirin containers.

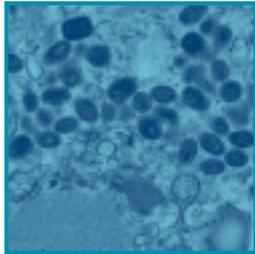
Aspirin manufacturers protested to the Reagan White House, which ordered further studies before deciding

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on any warnings. The CDC nevertheless published the studies, and at the same time noted that definitive information had yet to be obtained. In fact, the later studies did show that the original findings were correct. However, it was not until 1986, three years after Dr. Foege left the CDC, that the warning finally appeared.

Recounting this experience Dr. Foege argues that while the CDC must continue to base its decisions on the best science it can muster, there are inevitably factors beyond the science that will contribute to public policy decisions. “Every public health decision rests on a political decision,” he says. In a talk he gave a few years ago to the Association of State and Territorial Health Officers, he urged his audience to become involved in politics, to use their positions as health officials to make the political system work for social justice and so influence the system to make the right public health decisions.

In 1984, while he was professor of international health at Emory University in Atlanta Dr. Foege, along with several other colleagues, formed what became the Task Force for Child Survival and Development, a World Health Organization working group with the aim, among others, of achieving universal childhood immunization with what was at the time the standard six childhood vaccines—diphtheria, pertussis, polio, measles, mumps, and rubella. In six years the group raised the general immunization level of the world’s children from 20% to 80%. This led to an expansion of the task force’s goals to include efforts to control diseases such as polio, river blindness, tuberculosis, and the human immune deficiency virus. More recently the task force has added expertise and experience in injury and violence prevention. Dr. Foege served as the task force’s executive director until 1999.



In 1986 former President Jimmy Carter asked Dr. Foege to assume leadership of the Carter Center. Started by President and Mrs. Carter in 1982 in partnership with Emory University, the Center is committed to advancing human rights and alleviating unnecessary human suffering.

By the turn of the century Dr. Foege planned to retire to his home on Vashon Island in the Seattle area. However, Bill Gates asked him to become Senior Medical Advisor to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to work on the Foundation’s unprecedented health initiatives, and to advise the Foundation on strategies that could be usefully pursued in global health. Mr. Gates says that Dr. Foege had alerted him to the potential social impact of the funds the Foundation was spending, and suggested he read the 1993 World Development Report which quantifies the toll of disease in developing countries. For Mr. Gates the report was an eye opener.

“Working with the Gates Foundation is very rewarding because it has totally changed the field of global health,” said Dr. Foege in a 2001 interview with Dr. Allen Rosenfield, Dean of the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University. “They have given about 600 million dollars a year for global health . . . but it’s not just the money, it’s the hope that’s been engendered among those who have worked all their lives on a shoestring,” Dr. Foege says. “This is a wonderful time in global health.”

Dr. Foege is now a Fellow at The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. He continues his involvement with many organizations, including the Carter Center, the Marguerite Casey Foundation Board, the Global Health Council, and the Rockefeller Foundation. Dr. Foege has been a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science since 1991 and a Fellow of the Society of Behavioral Medicine since 1990.

The Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Award for Humanitarian Contributions to the Health of Humankind

THE JIMMY AND ROSALYNN CARTER AWARD for Humanitarian Contributions to the Health of Humankind is presented by the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases (NFID) to individuals whose outstanding humanitarian efforts and achieve-

ments have contributed significantly to improving the health of humankind. Criteria on which selection is based include:

- Legislative or administrative contributions;
- Humanitarian service; and/or
- Public education activities.

The Award is named for former President and Mrs. Carter, who as outstanding humanitarians, have worked tirelessly to improve the quality of life for people worldwide. They are co-founders of The Carter Center, a non-profit, nonpartisan organization based in Atlanta and dedicated to improving the quality of life for people. Through their work at The Carter Center, President and Mrs. Carter have worked to resolve conflict peacefully, promote democracy, protect human rights, and prevent and eradicate disease.

The Award, crafted by Steuben, signifies fine American craftsmanship, much as the Carters have signified outstanding Americans. The elegant three-dimensional glass sculpture, designed by Steuben, contains NFID’s symbol, the double helix. The Award is underwritten by a grant from Wyeth Pharmaceuticals.

